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Statement submitted by Northern Ireland Women's European Platform, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Social protection, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure are all critical and inextricably linked elements of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. In Northern Ireland, all three elements are particularly central to women's lives, as the economy is continuing to develop slowly and only 67 per cent of women aged 16–64 are employed. As Northern Ireland is predominantly rural, it also faces particular challenges in access to public services, while service provision and visible commitment to equality have been significantly affected by austerity.

Globally, the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals also requires effective implementation of all three elements. However, this depends on strong global commitment to empowering women and girls, which remains a significant challenge.

In Northern Ireland, there is currently no visible commitment to gender equality and no formal infrastructure for engaging women in policy and decision making; in addition, the devolved Assembly is not sitting and there has been no Executive since January 2017. It has been difficult to see a gender perspective in public policy, while gender-based stereotypes remain strong; the most recent draft Programme for Government (2016) makes no reference to gender.

Renewed political will, and a commitment to gender sensitive application of resources, is required to create mechanisms that effectively protect women and girls and promote women's empowerment. Such an approach is also essential to ensure implementation of the principles of United Nations Security Resolution 1325. Northern Ireland remains a society emerging from conflict, and the experience of women continues to be underreported, while women remain side-lined in post conflict reconstruction and community development. A sustainable infrastructure for empowering women and girls is a key area for action, while strong social protection mechanisms also required to ensure women can take control of their lives and live free from fear. This is particularly important in the current context as the United Kingdom withdraws from the European Union, insofar as European Union legislation has been pivotal in underpinning equality and human rights.

Social Protection

Social protection is at the heart of international human rights treaties, as a cornerstone for empowerment and the ability of people to fulfil their potential. In the United Kingdom including Northern Ireland, social protection is enshrined in law; however, issues around implementation and resourcing of policies affect women's and girls' effective enjoyment of social protection. Austerity has been a significant factor in this regard, and it is estimated that 85 per cent of benefit cuts in the United Kingdom have fallen on women, who are more reliant on benefits than men, as women take on the greatest part of unpaid care work and as such face barriers to full time employment. A particular area of concern is the introduction of Universal Credit, which introduces work related obligations on all parents with children over one. It also caps child related benefit payments to two children, with the only exception children conceived through rape.

We ask that social protection of women and girls is made a key priority through action across a range of policy areas:

Protecting Women and Girls Economically

- Undertaking a gender impact analysis of any new arrangements.

- Ensuring pension arranges treat women and men equitably and provide adequate compensation for any policy changes during an individual's working life.
- Taking account of the risk of abuse through economic arrangements, e.g. through offering split benefit payments to partners and protecting women in divorce.
- Tackling gender stereotypes leading to women predominating in sectors with low pay and precarious work and encouraging girls to continue in education.

Safeguarding Women and Girls

- Implementing and resourcing policies tackling violence against women and girls, including ratifying the Istanbul Convention.
- Implementing legal protections against discrimination, including discrimination in the workplace, pregnancy, maternity and parental leave related discrimination and sexual harassment.
- Providing effective access to justice and redress for women subjected to discrimination.
- Providing responsive and sensitive access to justice for women subjected to violence, including rape complainers.
- Challenging 'rape culture' and male dominated perspectives of sexuality and relationships.

Access to Public Services

Access to public services is linked to social protection, in that public services are intended to be universal and accessible to all. In particular women on lower incomes typically rely on them to meet their basic needs, while women also shoulder a disproportionate amount of unpaid care work. Therefore, the reduced funding and provision of public services resulting from austerity and policy changes constitutes a specific threat to gender equality as well as women's wellbeing. Women and girls in rural areas are particularly disadvantaged due to compounding factors such as lack of transport and digital infrastructure.

While sufficient investment in public services remains essential, action across a number of policy areas can help ensure women and girls have access to core services. Critical to this is investment in digital infrastructure, which not only can improve access to digital services, but can also contribute to widening access to learning and knowledge, as is emphasised in Sustainable Development Goal 4. This has particular potential for women in rural areas, as radio and mobile technology is now often available even in very low income and remote areas. Investment in education and training is, however, essential alongside roll out of digital services, to ensure that women of all ages and backgrounds can benefit equitably. There must be a specific focus on appropriate training for older women, women with low literacy, newcomer and refugee women, and also women with disabilities.

We ask, however, that access to public services for women and girls is safeguarded and promoted by investment in critical services including health and social care, education, public transport and child care. Co-production and gender impact analysis in service development, linked with rural proofing, is essential to ensure adequate provision. Gender and socio economically disaggregated statistics will assist in this.

Infrastructure for Gender Equality

Infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is at the heart of Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals, and is essential to ensure continued, effective engagement of women and visibility for gender equality in policy making. Yet, effective infrastructure is often missing or has been reduced in scope in recent years. In Northern Ireland, there is currently no infrastructure, while women in Northern Ireland also do not enjoy the same protections as afforded to women elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Legislation passed in 2016 also restricts organisations receiving public funding in how they engage with policy and advocacy work, which has frustrated the work of many civil society organisations.

We ask that infrastructure is strengthened through mainstreaming a gender perspective in policy making, as outlined above. In addition, we ask that steps are taken to strengthen mechanisms for engaging women in policy making through:

Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Policy and Decision Making

- Robust gender impact analysis in all policy and decision making.
- Strengthening gender competence within government and public bodies.
- Identification of inequalities, with appropriate strategies and action plans developed.
- Collection of data and enabling gender disaggregation of existing statistics.

Enabling Effective Engagement of Women

- Adequate resourcing of women's networks.
- Funding for organisations and initiatives seeking to build engagement capacity with women in grass roots communities.
- Implementation of good engagement practice, including engaging women and girls at an early stage of policy development, in line with recommendations by the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women Committee.

Protecting Core Freedoms and Rights of all Women and Girls

- Ensuring the nationality rights of all women and girls are upheld, including migrants, refugees and widows.
- Developing timely and transparent processes for seeking asylum, citizenship and residency, with adequate support for applicants with limited literacy or language skills.
- Providing support for women from Black, Asian, minority ethnic and refugee backgrounds to access services, training and employment.
- Ensuring clarity on rights and entitlements for European Union and British citizens following the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union

Conclusion

The Sustainable Development Goals will only be secured by copper fastening women's rights and equality, taking account of intersectionality. Urgent action across the themes is required to protect and promote women's empowerment in the context of significant change and challenge to human rights and equality frameworks across

the globe. Northern Ireland Women's European Platform support the conclusions of the High-Level Expert Group as a basis for action and call for strong agreed conclusions to support national level action.